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ABSTRACT

The study interviewed 41 middle school children (25 gifted and the remainder of average ability) from intact and not intact homes to gather their perceptions of divorce's effects on school now and in the future. Results included the following statements. Differences in responses centered around the subject's cognitive abilities, more than on family status. Gifted students had more to say than non-gifted students. Gifted students spoke with high moral and cognitive reasoning abilities. They saw several good effects from divorce in abstract and long term consequences compared to non-gifted children, who saw the effects of divorce as immediate and unidimensional. Gifted children expressed a desire to know what was happening. All children saw divorce as a splitting mechanism with school seen as a refuge, a moderating change agent, and a treatment center. Children saw marriage as worthwhile and predicted marriage for themselves. The future was seen as a cold complex world with one-parent families predicted as the norm. Children from non intact homes identified three authority centers (each parent and the school) while children from intact homes identified two authority centers (the parents as a unit and the school). (DB)

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CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF DIVORCE'S EFFECTS ON SCHOOL NOW AND IN THE FUTURE

Carolyn R. Falk, Ph.D.

A generation ago the largest proportion of single parents was widowed; today the largest proportion is divorced or separated (Moles, 1982). What will the future hold? Almost half of all children born in 1980 will live a considerable time with only one parent before they reach the age of eighteen (Brown, 1980). How do today's children view the effects of divorce on the future? Children have little to say in the divorce decision but are affected by it. Negative effects of divorce on school functioning has been reported (Brown, 1980; Edgar & Headlam, 1982; Fry & Grover, 1983; Guidubaldi & Perry, 1984; Hammond, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1972, 1975, 1978; Kurdek & Berg, 1983; Reinhard, 1977; Santrock, 1972).

Studies that dealt with children's perceptions of divorce (Fry & Trifiletti, 1983; Kurdek & Siesky, 1980; Rosen, 1977; Springer & Wallerstein, 1983; Wallerstein, 1984, 1985; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979, 1980, 1984, 1985) included children that had experienced parental divorce. The children accessible to researchers were those children of divorce who were experiencing problems. Yet divorce affects all children (Allers, 1981), whether they worry that it will happen or they are concerned about their friends to whom it has happened.

To appreciate a fuller spectrum of children's perceptions of

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divorce's effects on school, now and in the future, 41 middle school from intact and not intact homes were interviewed.

From the theoretical perspective of cognitive-development , a child experiencing divorce is actively structuring and interpreting the events of divorce (Kurdek & Siesky, 1980). Yet the cognitive level of children with respect to their perceptions of divorce had not been thoroughly investigated. An informal report (Arent, 1985), suggested that gifted children are deeply affected by divorce and these effects were different from children with average intellectual abilities.

This study interviewed gifted and children of average academic abilities, from intact and not intact homes to gather their perceptions of divorce's effects on school now and in the future.

Forty-one middle school aged subjects were selected from three schools in Connecticut (private, suburban and city). The sample was purposefully selected to insure inclusion of maximum variation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of children with high (identified as gifted) and average cognitive abilities some of whom have experienced parental divorce and some of whom have not. Of the 41 students, 21 were from intact homes and 20 were from not intact homes; 25 had been identified as gifted, 16 had not; 16 were from the private school, 14 were from the city school, and 11 were from the suburban school. A total of 24 females and 17 males met individually, for three -twenty minute

sessions, making a total of 123 sessions.

Interviews, writing samples, a subtest of the Defining Issues Test (Rest,1972, 1979a, 1979b), card sorting, and item ranking were the measuring instruments used in this study. Analysis of variance, t-tests, chi square were the evaluation methods. The interviews were transcribed and coded for themes, and level of sophistication of content. The writing samples were quantified for length, percent of new words used, and themes. One subtest of the Defining Issues Test (The Escaped Prisoner) was used as an indicator of level of moral reasoning. Card sorting was measured by sequencing techniques and priority choices.

Each of the three interview sessions contained questions in four domains : family, divorce, school life, and effects of divorce on school life. Each domain had four sub-categories: definitions, types, ideals, and future projections. Each session was transcribed and shown to the subject at the next session for additions or corrections.

At the third and final session, a subtest of the Defining Issues Test (Rest, 1972, 1979a, 1979b),"The Escaped Prisoner", was given to infer a level of moral reasoning. This instrument is based on the work of Kohlberg (1981, 1984). Each subject was asked to write a speech would be read to the 'Board of Education of the World' by a leading policy maker. The speech was to contain the respondent's recommendations for schools in helping students, whose parents had recently divorced, cope in their

school life. Cards containing a review of literature's six common themes were presented to the respondents at the final session and they were asked to rank them in order of their perceived importance. This was done to see whether the responses of children from intact and well as not intact homes would be similar to those responses of subjects in previous studies.

When all of the above was completed, a debriefing segment was conducted. This included wind-down types of questions like: "What are your plans for the summer?" Some demographic questions, "How many places have you lived?" and some personal prediction questions: "Do you think you will marry? Do you think you will get divorced?" Some philosophical questions were asked: "What is the most important thing in a marriage? Can you make your future happen?"

Respondent reliability was of a diachronic nature. "Diachronic reliability is conventionally demonstrated by similarity of measurements, or findings, taken at different times" (Kirk & Miller, 1986, p.42). The respondents were asked similar domain questions on three separate occasions. To check upon the researcher's biases, four separate kinds of field notes were taken on each interview day. The four types of field notes were verbatim, expanded account, field work journal and problems and suggestions lists (Spradley, 1979). Themes from the field notes were checked to see if they influenced or directed the questioning of respondents.

The statistical measure used to compare the cognitive level (gifted/non-gifted), and family status (intact/not intact) group scores, on the DIT, attendance records, length of writing samples, SES levels, and national percentile ranks, was the t-test. To compare the three schools in writing samples, SES levels, and attendance records, a one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used with follow up analyses of a Tukey, with the harmonic 'n' used for unequal cell adjustments, and a Scheffé. A two-way ANOVA was used to investigate a possible interaction between cognitive levels and family status with respect to the writing samples. Chi square (X^2), statistics were calculated for comparison reportings of gifted and non-gifted students, and intact and not intact students' homes on the locus of control question, and school life definitions.

The participant's responses were reduced for internal themes on each of the three sessions. The themes were combined to form composite individual themes. Themes were gleaned by coding broad areas. Attention was given to the domains of family, divorce, school life and effects of divorce on school life. On individual case history reportings, the strategies of cognitive thinking structures, moral thinking structures, personal philosophies, and individual vocabulary and phraseology was induced, deduced and coded. Each respondent's major theme or themes were place on separate index cards which were then placed in piles by theme.

The incidence and impact of divorce affects all students. All the students in this study had numerous concepts about divorce and its effects on school life. Differences in responses centered around the subject's cognitive abilities, more than the family status.

Statistical findings showed a significant difference between gifted and non-gifted subjects in the areas of school absenteeism, parental socio-economic status, DIT scores and story length (see Table 1).

Table 1. A COMPARISON OF GIFTED AND NON-GIFTED STUDENTS ON STATUS, BEHAVIOR AND STORY VARIABLES

Variables	Gifted (N=25)	Non-Gifted (N=16)
Absenteeism	6.00 (4.26)	12.81** (7.83)
Socioeconomic Status	19.40 (5.07)	29.06** (10.98)
Defining Issues Test	3.96 (0.74)	3.50* (0.52)
Story Length	31.64 (17.69)	21.69** (7.25)

* $p<0.05$
** $p<0.01$

The private school was significantly different from the city school with respect to absenteeism and socio-economic status and significantly different from both the city and suburban school with respect to the length the story developed from cards (see Table 2).

Table 2. A Comparison Among The City, Private and Suburban Schools on Absenteeism, Status And Story Length

Variables	City (N=14)	Private (N=16)	Suburban (N=11)
Absenteeism	12.71 (7.21)	5.38 (3.95)	8.27** (7.03)
Socioeconomic Status	29.29 (12.06)	18.13 (3.10)	22.73** (6.09)
Story Length	20.79 (7.03)	37.56 (18.99)	22.36** (8.23)

** $p<0.001$

Although children from not intact homes had a larger percentage of new words in their story developed from the cards, it was not statistically significant (see Table 3). The children from not intact homes had a large vocabulary of legal terms.

Table 3. Main Effect Comparison of Intact and Not Intact Families on Percentage of New Word in Story.

Variable	Intact (N=21)	Not Intact N=20)
% New Words In Story	81.33 (11.01)	84.55 (9.98)

$p>0.05$

The themes of the participants were placed into groupings by cognitive level and family status in order to expand the perceptions. Gifted youngsters had more to say. Their transcripts were twice as long as the non gifted subjects. The story length was significantly longer. There was a significant difference Chi Square (X^2, $p<0.05$) between gifted and non-gifted in their definitions of school life. Non-gifted defined school in

only cognitive terms, while the gifted subjects defined school in the affective domain.

Gifted youngsters spoke from more points of view. In describing the story cards they mentioned the feelings and perspective of the adults as well as the children. Gifted youngsters spoke with high moral and cognitive reasoning abilities. They saw several good effects from divorce in abstract and long term consequences compared to non-gifted children, who saw the effects of divorce as immediate and unidimensional. There was a significant difference, for the DIT scores as compared to the non-gifted subjects. Gifted children expressed a desire to know what was happening. They felt that if the parents explained what was going on as soon as it began, the adjustment process for everyone would be facilitated. Reasons were given to justify any conclusion that gifted youngsters stated. These youngsters were aware of societal expectations as well as their own aspirations (see Table 4).

Table 4 . Non-gifted vs. Gifted Responses

Question	Non-gifted	Gifted
Good effects?	Fighting would stop	Once you survive a stressful situation, you have confidence in your ability to cope in the future
Family	Living together	Working together
Divorce	Not wanting to live together	Not being able to work together
Effects on School	Cognitive	Affective

All the children saw divorce as a splitting mechanism which breaks, tears and separates their families' foundation. School was seen as a refuge, a moderating change agent, and a treatment center. The treatment of choice ranged from special programs to being treated the same as other students.

The common theme for all groups was that family matters. "Family", is a caring loving group and divorce splits this group apart. The membership of the family group depended on the intactness of the family (see Table 5). Many children from homes that were not intact saw grandparents, great grandparents, siblings and pets as significant family members.

Table 5 .Not intact vs. Intact Homes Responses

Issue	Not Intact	Intact
Terms used	Custody battle	Argue
	File for divorce	Separate
	Lawyer's fees	Love
	Judge's rulings	Responsibility
Family membership	Grandparents	Mom and dad
	Siblings/Pets	
Parents	Separate entities	One unit
Concerns	Money	Grades
	Well being of custodial parent	Friends
Effects on School	Affective	Cognitive

Marriage was seen as worthwhile and most respondents predicted marriage for themselves. Children saw numerous good effects of divorce such as cessation of fighting and abuse and the beginning of a new closeness with their parents on an individual basis. Love was seen as the most important thing in a

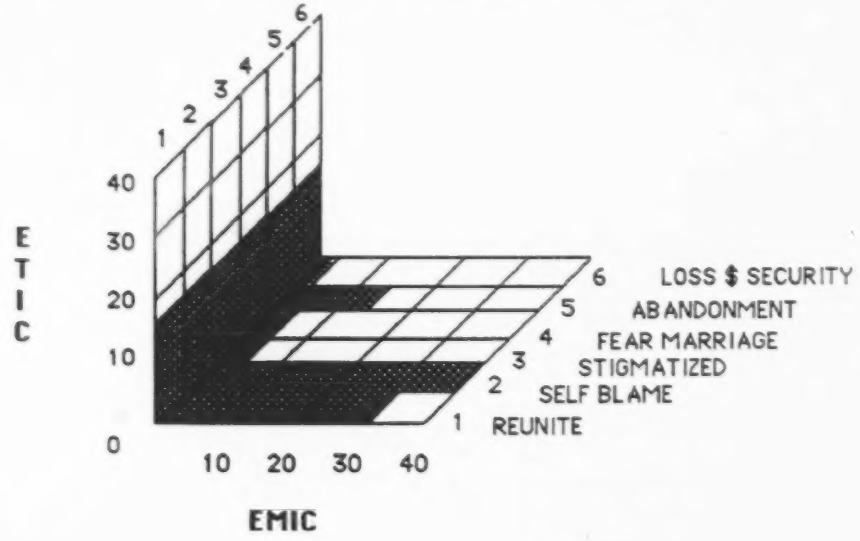
marriage as well as what children of divorce need most.

The future was seen as a cold, fast paced, complex world. One parent families were predicted as the norm. Robotic take over was seen as the cause for lazy family workers and mean and indifferent teachers (see Table 6).

Table 6. Present vs. Future Perceptions

Issue	Present	Future
Family	work together	robots do work
	caring	more complex
	based on love	based on things
	mom and dad	step parent
	hard working	lazy
	earn things	have things
Divorce	as last resort	easy option
	work it out	more violent
	joint custody	never see parent
	lawyers	robotic lawyers
School	some computer	more computers
	good teachers	mean teachers
	learn at own pace	learn faster
	Heterogeneous groups	homogeneous groups
	trial and error	research
Attitudes	quality	quantity

Figure 1. Model depicting etic and emic responses.



The responses that were previously cited (etic responses) in equal distributions are: hope that parents will reunite, feelings of self blame, feeling socially stigmatized, fear of marriage for themselves, fear of abandonment and the fear of a loss of economic security. The responses from this study (emic responses) emphasized feelings of self blame, hope that parents will reunite and the fear of abandonment more than the other themes (see Figure 1). The model developed from this study depicts this uneven profile.

Throughout the interviews with children from not intact homes an awareness of the parents as separate entities was evident. The school was one of three authority centers in the child's life. The responses from children from intact homes, echoed a two authority center, the parents and the school. The parents were seen as one unit.

Gifted children saw issues at a greater depth and with a broader scope than did non-gifted children. When gifted children were asked about the effects of divorce on school life, they answered with "it depends" and proceeded to create several scenarios based on the different possible premises. When asked to describe the pictures that comprise a family story they were able to see the adult as well as the child's points of view.

The rate of divorce is increasing. Children perceive the world and its phenomenon as individuals trying to make sense out of their environment. The sense that these children are making

from the divorce phenomenon, is that the future will be a cold and impersonal place. One parent families will be commonplace, attitudes will be harsh, peers will be robots. Consequences of technology was seen as a breakdown of the work ethic morality.

The perceptions of children identified as gifted was not better or worse than those not identified as gifted, merely different. Gifted children were able to see more reasons, options and consequences to the divorce phenomenon as compared to the non-gifted subjects. Their viewpoints were broader and represented more views than their own. Non-gifted children expressed egocentric views that had short termed consequences.

At the difficult time of parental divorce it appears that schools can be a stabilizing support system for children. The perceptions of the children in this study about the school of the future, gives educators a reason to reexamine the messages and models we give children today.

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